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ABSTRACT

Although school social workers (SSW's) are one of the few resources in the schools primarily designated to prevent and remediate personal and social problems that contribute to underachievement and deviant student behavior, many SSW's in Georgia are being replaced by noncertified attendance workers. Some educators claim that these attendance workers perform similar functions and cost less than certified social workers. In a study examining this claim, mailed surveys covering 10 areas of worker tasks or responsibilities were completed by 57 attendance workers and 124 certified SSW's. The ten areas covered were school attendance, assessment of children, direct services to children, services to teachers, services to parents, special education services, leadership and planning, liaison to community, liaison to human service agencies and the juvenile court, and child abuse and neglect services. The results of the survey revealed that masters level school social workers attached significantly greater importance to most of the service areas and more frequently performed tasks in most of the areas than did attendance workers. The results also showed that the majority of attendance workers' salaries were equivalent to SSW's, suggesting no economic advantage to hiring attendance workers rather than certified social workers. (NRB)

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A Profession at Risk: A Comparison of School Social Workers and Attendance Workers

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In Georgia school social workers are gradually being replaced by attendance workers. Some educators claim that noncertified attendance workers perform similar functions at less cost than certified social workers. A survey compared the two groups on ten service area. The survey revealed that masters level school social workers attach significantly greater importance to most of the service areas and more frequently performed tasks in most of the areas. Furthermore, the majority of attendance workers' salaries are equivalent to school social workers'. Thus, in most cases there is no economic advantage to hiring attendance workers rather than social workers.

A Comparison of Social Workers' and Attendance Workers'
Contributions to Academic Excellence

In recent years there have been volumes written and litanies spoken in complaint of the public schools: their mediocrity, low standards, loss of discipline, the flight to private schools, legislative intrusion, the prevalence of drug use, and so on. The need to examine our school systems has become more critical with the increase in disturbing conditions within the schools themselves, often attributed to the social problems of the pupils, their families, and the community. Furthermore, problems such as drug abuse, poverty, discrimination, mental illness, child abuse, teenage pregnancy, family dysfunction, and delinquency impact the capacity of school administrators, teachers, pupils, and parents to work together for academic excellence. The widely publicized report, A Nation at Risk, has increased the country's awareness of the need to improve our children's academic achievement.[1] The report stresses that, in order to raise our schools out of mediocrity, academic standards must be heightened, teacher competence increased, and basic skills must be taught. No doubt higher standards, enhanced teacher performance, and an emphasis on basic skills are key ingredients in striving for academic excellence. However, as the report, The Human Factor: A Key to Excellence in Education, vividly stresses, psychological, social, and economic factors play significant roles in predisposing children to learning.[2] Factors such as community expectations for excellence, the job market, family members' mental health, parental involvement in their children's education, and students involvement in educational decision-making can heighten or diminish students motivation and readiness to learn.

School social workers (SSW's) are one of the few resources in the schools primarily designated to prevent and remediate personal and social problems that contribute to underachievement and deviant student behavior. However, over the past several years in the state of Georgia, SSW's in many school systems have been replaced by attendance workers who have no formal social work training for helping troubled students. Some educators contend that noncertified attendance workers perform similar functions at less cost than certified SSW's.

Attendance workers are not unique to Georgia. However, it is difficult to obtain an accurate estimate of the number of states that use attendance workers. Furthermore, attendance workers are not a homogeneous group. Their title, educational qualifications and certification status vary from state to state. Hawkins' nationwide survey of certification standards reveals a wide array of differences.[3] Approximately 20 percent of the states have certification standards for attendance workers. Some states have no provisions for employing them, while still others do hire attendance workers but have no certification provisions.

This paper is a summary of the methodology and results of a comprehensive comparative survey of SSW's and attendance workers in Georgia. The purpose of the survey was to determine the tasks that SSW's and attendance workers perform in dealing with truancy as well as with other personal and social problems. The paper also includes conclusions and recommendations regarding how both groups contribute to academic excellence.

Survey Method

In March of 1984 all SSW's and attendance workers in the state of Georgia were mailed a copy of a ninety-three item questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from the survey instrument originally developed by Costin (1969)

and later modified by Meares (1977) and Lambert and Mullaly (1982) to measure the tasks that SSW's might perform relative to parents, children, teachers, administrators, other school personnel, community agencies, and interest groups.[3] Items 1 - 64 contain a list of tasks. Respondents were instructed, "This rating scale contains a list of tasks which an attendance worker or a SSW may perform when he/she works in a school setting. We ask you to make two judgments about each task." In answering the first question, "How important is it?," respondents indicated their opinions on a four point scale (1 = not important to 4 = very important). The second question, "How often do you do it?," was answered on a six point scale (1 = never to 6 = daily). The 64 items covered 10 areas (factors) of worker tasks or responsibilities: school attendance, assessment of children, direct services to children, services to teachers, services to parents, special education services, leadership and planning, liaison to community, liaison to human service agencies and the juvenile court, and child abuse and neglect services. Items 65-93 sought information regarding the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their communities as well as average daily attendance (ADA) of their school system and the average caseload of each respondent.

Survey Respondents

Of the 313 workers who were mailed a survey, 191 completed it. Of these respondents, 31% were attendance workers (Group 1). This group is composed of workers whose education level ranges from a high school diploma to graduate degrees. However, members of this group have no formal education in school social services and are not certified by the Georgia Department of Education (see Table 1). Thirty eight percent of the respondents were SSW's with a Masters of Education in school social services or a Masters of Education in another area of education plus 25-35 hours of graduate training in social work

(Group 2), 19% were SSW's with a Masters of Social Work degree (Group 3), 10% were SSW's with an Educational Specialist degree in school social services (Group 4), and 2% were categorized as other. The members of the latter three groups are certified as SSW's by the Georgia Department of Education.

Insert Table 1 Here

Comparisons of the four groups indicate that Group 4 workers are the most experienced in working in the schools and in working as SSW's (see Table 2). Group 3 members are the least experienced. Group 3 is composed predominantly of females, while Group 4 has the highest percentage of male members. Forty four percent of the members of Group 2, 40% of Group 3, 33% of Group 1, and 11% of Group 4 are black. On the average, members of Groups 2 and 4 are the oldest and Group 3 the youngest.

Insert Table 2 Here

The mean salary level for the Group 1 member is $16,500; for a Group 3 member, $19,350; for a Group 2 member, $19,500; and for a Group 4 member, $20,400. Further examination of the salary data reveals that 60% of Group 2, 59% of Group 3, and 94% of Group 4 fell into the top income category (more than $21,000 per year). The income data for Group 1 had a bimodal curve pattern. Fifty one percent of Group 1 members reported having salaries in either of the top two salary categories ($19,000-$20,999 and more than $21,000). Twenty five percent of this group reported earning salaries of less than $12,000 per year. Those differences in salary levels correspond to the differences in the educational background of the group's members. In sum, the

majority of Group 1 members' salaries are comparable to those of the other groups. However, a substantial minority of attendance workers, many of whom have long tenure with their school systems, continue to earn significantly less than their more educated counterparts. It is often assumed that attendance workers earn less money than certified SSW's. The facts indicate that in a minority of cases, this assumption is true. However, the majority of attendance workers' (Group 1) salaries are equivalent to those of certified workers (Groups 2, 3, and 4). Thus, in most cases there is no economic advantage to the school system for hiring noncertified rather than certified workers.

Findings

The findings are summarized according to the ten areas (factors) of worker tasks or responsibilities. One way analysis of variance was used to determine whether there were differences between the four groups on how important the groups perceived each task listed in items 1-64. The Duncans procedure was used to determine which groups were significantly different from others. In addition, on the variable of importance, discriminant analysis was used to find the linear combination of items for each factor which maximize the F-test. The Chi-square test was used to determine differences between groups on the frequency with which groups reported performing each task. When referring to statistical significance in this paper, a level of .05 or lower is assumed. Before summarizing the findings for each of the 10 factors, data on caseloads for each group are presented.

Caseload. As Table 3 indicates, the average active caseload in elementary, junior high, and senior high for Group 1 was 20.8, 10.3, and 21.6 respectively; for Group 2, 25.9, 25.9, and 22.7; for Group 3, 33.0, 23.3, and 22.9; and for Group 4, 37.7, 33.8, and 25.7. The data reveals that Group 1

had a significantly lighter caseload than Groups 3 and 4 at the elementary school level. At the junior high level Group 1 had a significantly lower caseload than all of the other three groups. All 4 groups had similar caseloads at the high school level. The total active caseloads for Groups 2, 3, and 4 were significantly higher than for Group 1. The caseload of Group 4 was almost double that of Group 1.

Insert Table 3 Here

School attendance. This factor consisted of five items related to the prevention and remediation of truancy problems. No differences were found in the importance each group attached to attendance work. In general, each group thought attendance fell in the "very important" range of the scale. Thus, all groups see attendance as a high priority. Furthermore, no differences were found in the frequency with which each group performed the attendance tasks.

A comparison was made between the ADA rates for systems employing noncertified (Group 1) workers and certified (Groups 2, 3, and 4) workers. This comparison was based on a subsample composed of only rural school systems or systems with less than 4000 students which employed either only certified or noncertified workers. The findings reveal that there were no differences between the two groups in ADA rates. The mean for the noncertified group was 95.6 percent and for the certified group, 95.1 percent.

Assessment of children. This factor consisted of ten items related to reviewing students' files, obtaining relevant information from teachers, parents, and agencies who have had experience with a child, evaluating various levels of a child's functioning, and preparing a socio-medical history. The discriminant analysis F-test revealed significant differences between groups

in the value attached to the assessment of students. The analysis of variance tests indicated that Group 1 viewed child assessment as being significantly less important, particularly than Group 3, but also Group 2. Group 1 differed from Group 3 on five items and Group 2 on three items. For instance, Group 1 thought that "Assesses the child's functioning in relation to his neighborhood patterns and other cultural influences," was "important" whereas Groups 2 and 3 thought it was "very important." The attitude of Group 4 fell somewhere in between Group 1 and Groups 2 and 3, and it did not differ significantly from any other group's attitude towards child assessment.

Examination of the frequency with which each group performs assessment related tasks revealed significant differences. It appears that Group 1 performed three assessment items less frequently than Groups 2 and 3. Differences were found on items: "Obtains from parent's information on the child's behavior at home . . . ," "Assesses the child's functioning in relation to his neighborhood patterns and other cultural influences," and "Assesses children for placement into special education." Group 4 did not differ significantly from the other groups. In sum, Group 1 was less committed to and involved in the assessment of troubled students than Groups 2 and 3. These groups assumed an active role in assessing both students and their environment.

Direct services to children. This factor consisted of nine items regarding the counseling of students individually and in groups to help them modify inappropriate school behavior and attitudes. In measuring the importance of direct services to children the discriminant analysis F-test revealed significant differences between groups in the importance given to providing direct services to pupils. Further, the analysis of variance tests indicated that Group 1 differed significantly from Group 2 on five items, and

from Groups 3 and 4 on two items. For example, Group 1 thought it was less important than Groups 2 and 3 to "Help the child gain insight into his emotional problem," and "Work with groups of children using group process." Similarly, Group 1 placed less emphasis than Groups 2 and 4 on "Working with an individual child in a casework relationship."

There were significant differences in the frequency of task performance on five items. The data suggest that on items such as, "Helps the child to control or express his feelings appropriately" and "Helps the child change his overt behavior in life situations," Group 1 was less involved than the other groups, especially Group 2. In sum, Groups 3 and 4 and especially Group 2 were significantly more committed to and involved in the delivery of direct services to children than Group 1.

Services to teachers. This factor consisted of three items: "Discusses nature of teacher's interaction with children"; "Acts as a liaison between teacher and parent"; and "Consults with teachers about placement of children in special education programs." The discriminant analysis F-test indicated significant differences between groups. The analysis of variance tests revealed that Group 1 attached significantly less importance to the first two items than either Group 2 or 3. On the second item Group 4 placed significantly more importance on it than Group 1.

Significant differences were found in the frequency with which groups performed the first and last items. Observation of the data suggest that Group 1 tended to provide fewer services to teachers than Groups 2 and 3. Group 4 did not differ significantly from the other groups. Attendance workers were less likely to perceive and assume a role of working with teachers as colleagues than were masters level SSW's.

Services to parents. This factor included sixteen items related toobtaining information from parents regarding their children's behavior, emotions and development, counseling parents of troubled and handicapped students, helping parents better understand their children, increasing parents' understanding of the schools' expectations, and serving as a liaison between the family and human service agencies. The discriminant analysis F-test approached but revealed no significant differences between the four groups in their perception of the importance of providing services to parents. However, the analysis of variance tests showed that Groups 2 and 3 differed significantly from Group 1 on five items. Furthermore, Group 4 differed significantly from Group 2 on three items and from Group 3 on two items. In the case of some tasks, Groups 2 and 3 considered it more important to provide these services to parents than Groups 1 and 4.

An examination of the frequency data showed significant differences between groups on nine items for the delivery of services to parents. The tendency was for Group 1 to perform these parental services less often than the other groups, especially Groups 2 and 3. A sample of items in which differences appeared include: "Clarifies with the parents the school's social and academic expectations and regulations," "Supplies parents with information they may need to improve relationships within the family," and "Makes suggestions as to how the parents can improve their relationships with their teacher and his school." The results reveal a marked difference in the frequency with which Group 1, compared to the other groups, work with parents.

Special education services. This factor consisted of 8 items related to the assessment and treatment of handicapped children and their families, and consultation with school personnel regarding the placement of exceptional students. Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, many states have employed SSW's

to provide diagnostic and treatment services to handicapped children and their families. In some states SSW's are considered to be an integral part of the services to exceptional children. For the most part, this has not been the trend in Georgia. The discriminant analysis indicated a significant difference between groups in their perception of the importance of providing services to special education. The analysis of variance tests showed that the major difference was in Group 4, which placed less value on the importance than did the other groups. Groups 1 and 3 were quite similar in their perception of the importance while Group 2 rated importance somewhat higher than both these groups.

There were significant differences in the frequency with which the groups performed four items: "Consults with teachers about placement of children in special programs," "Assesses children for placement into special programs," "Helps exceptional children understand their differences from other children," and "Participates in IEP meetings for special education placement." The data suggest that Group 3 performed these tasks significantly more often than Group 1. Groups 2 and 4 did not differ significantly from either group.

Leadership and planning. This factor consisted of 11 tasks related to consultation with school administrators in formulating policy on pupil welfare, the promotion of improved special services for students, alerting school administrators to school and community conditions affecting students' performance, and assisting in providing in-service training to school personnel and in conducting research projects. The discriminant analysis found significant differences between groups in the value attached to leadership and planning tasks. Analysis of variance tests showed that Group 1 differed significantly from Groups 2 and 3 on four items. Group 1 tended to

place less importance on leadership and planning tasks than did these groups. Group 4 fell in between both sets.

Despite the marked differences in the importance attached to leadership and planning tasks, the frequency data revealed that, with the exception of three items, there were no significant differences between the groups in the performance of these tasks. The data suggest that Group 1 differed only from Group 2 on all three items. The three items were related to awareness of cultural influences on pupils' lives and the acceptance of responsibility in working with community agencies. Groups 3 and 4 did not differ substantially from either Groups 1 or 2. In sum, Group 1 views leadership and planning as less important than the other groups. However, with the exception of some roles related to community Group 1 tended to perform leadership and planning tasks about as frequently as other groups.

Liaison to community. This factor consisted of four tasks related to the enhancement of school-community relations, support of community programs for youth, and the provision of leadership to community groups. The discriminant analysis revealed significant differences between groups in their perception of the importance of providing liaison services to the community. The analysis of variance tests showed that on all four items Group 1 differed significantly from Groups 2 and 3, and on one item from Group 4. Group 1 placed the least value on serving as a liaison to community while Groups 2 and 3 placed the most importance. Group 4 fell in between these two sets.

The task frequency results indicate significant differences on two items. The data suggest that Group 1 differed significantly from the other groups on the item "Attends and contributes to meetings of social action groups, aside from professional social work or educational organizations." Group 1 also differed significantly from Groups 2 and 4 on the item, "Accepts

responsibilities within a community council or other planning and coordinating group." In sum, Group 1 placed less emphasis on the importance of enhancing school-community relations, particularly than Groups 2 and 3. Correspondingly, its members were significantly less involved in working as liaisons to community groups and projects.

Liaison to human service agencies and the juvenile court. This factor consisted of eight tasks regarding referral to agencies and court, linking school, agencies and court, consultation with special service personnel to develop and coordinate treatment plans for children, liaison between families and agencies, and assisting in bringing about new school programs through work with other individuals and community groups. The discriminant analysis showed highly significant differences in the importance the groups attach to serving as a liaison to human service agencies and the juvenile court. The analysis of variance tests revealed that Groups 1 and 4 varied substantially from Groups 2 and 3. Group 1 differed from Group 2 on four items and from Group 3 on three items. Group 4 differed from Groups 2 and 3 on two items each. For instance, Groups 2 and 3 were more concerned about "Acting as a liaison between a family and a social agency to insure that following referral services get underway," than were Groups 1 and 4.

The task frequency data revealed significant differences on three items. The differences appear to lie between Group 1 and Groups 2 and 3. Group 4 did not differ from either set. Group 1 tended to be less involved in performing the liaison tasks of "Serves as a liaison between the schools and courts"; "Consults with other special service personnel to develop and coordinate an overall treatment approach for the child"; and "Actively encourages child or family to make maximum use of community resources to which they have been referred, and acts as an advocate when community services aren't responsive."

Thus, Group 1 is markedly different from Groups 2 and 3 in its concern for and involvement in performing some liaison roles to human service agencies and the juvenile court.

Child abuse and neglect services. This factor consisted of two tasks: "Refers abused and neglected students to Child Protective Services"; and "Works with abused and neglected children." The discriminant analysis and the analysis of variance tests revealed no differences in the importance each group attaches to providing services to abused and neglected children. However, there were significant differences in the frequency with which groups performed these tasks. The results suggest that Group 2 performed the tasks significantly more often than Groups 1 and 3. Group 4 did not differ substantially from other groups. Thus, although all groups placed similar value on the importance of providing services to abused and neglected children, Group 2 is significantly more involved in doing so than are Groups 1 and 3.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this time of heightened educational fervor and scrutiny, it is important to take an in-depth look at the ways in which attendance workers (noncertified) and SSW's (certified) are contributing to academic excellence. While higher standards, increased expenditures, enhanced teacher competence, and an emphasis on basic academic skills appear to be essential ingredients in our search for academic excellence, our recipe for educational improvement must also be cognizant of the many other variables that impact children's readiness to learn. The Human Factor: A Key to Excellence in Education highlights recommendations for overcoming student, family, school, and community barriers to academic success.[4] Key recommendations include: strengthening collaboration between the school and community, strengthening

direct services to students and parents, and enhancing school climate. SSW's perform a rather unique combination of roles. Their training has stressed the provision of assessment and counseling services to students and their families, consultation services to teachers, leadership and planning assistance to school administrators, coordination services with agencies and courts, and liaison services between the schools and community organizations. These services ameliorate the psychological, social, and economic stresses impinging upon troubled students.

The results of the survey reveal a fairly consistent pattern in workers' attitudes towards and performance of these services. In general, attendance workers tend to place less value on and be less involved in the majority of service areas than certified workers. SSW's report having substantially larger caseloads. Most notable is Group 4. Furthermore, certified workers, especially those in Groups 2 and 3, attach more importance to the assessment of troubled children; the provision of services to children, teachers and parents; assisting school administration with appropriate leadership and planning tasks; and serving as a link between the school and community groups and agencies. Correspondingly, Groups 2 and 3 perform most services significantly more frequently than did noncertified workers. Specifically, they more frequently performed tasks in the areas of assessment of children, direct service to children, services to teachers, services to parents, liaison to community, and liaison to agencies and the court. Group 3 was more involved in providing special education services than Group 1. Group 2 more often provided services to abused and neglected students than Groups 1 and 3. With a few exceptions the trend for was Group 4 not to differ measurably from other groups in the frequency with which it performed tasks in the ten factors.

In the drive to upgrade the quality of our nation's schools, much criticism has been heaped on the teaching profession, and considerable emphasis has been placed on enhancing teacher competence. Controversy surrounds plans to not certify or recertify teachers who fail to perform up to predetermined standards. Correspondingly, the results of this survey call into question the merit of hiring attendance workers rather than master's level SSW's. In some states attendance workers and SSW's are viewed as interchangeable parts; superintendents can employ either or both. Yet, the differences in how they fulfill their roles are glaring. Attendance workers carry lighter case loads than SSW's and perform a rather narrow role, focusing largely on attendance. In contrast, SSW's deal not only with attendance but also regularly perform a wide range of roles needed to assist troubled students and their families.

Although student attendance is a sine qua non to learning, the National Center for Policy Analysis has questioned the relationship between attendance and student achievement scores. The Center's studies show that as states' attendance levels have risen, achievement test scores have dropped.[5] In the past emphasis has been placed on getting children into the school because most states' education funding formulas are based largely or wholly on ADA rates. There is a growing awareness that to attain academic excellence, changes are needed in funding formulas to reduce reliance on ADA rates, and more closely tie funding to student learning needs and achievement. If this trend takes hold, there should be an increasing need for workers who can not only perform attendance functions but who can also help troubled, underachieving students who do attend school. The survey reveals that master's level SSW's are better suited to do this than are attendance workers.

Finally, in this age of taxpayer revolt, the cost-benefit of school services is constantly under scrutiny. The results of the survey challenge the perceived notion that attendance workers work for lower salaries than SSW's. Most attendance workers' salaries are equivalent to those of SSW's. It may be timely for other states to compare salary levels of both groups. Furthermore, the data suggest that SSW's are more cost-effective than attendance workers. Not only do SSW's carry heavier, active caseloads but, when looking at the ten factors as a whole, they report a substantially higher activity level or rate of task performance. Thus, SSW's provide more bang for each taxpayer dollar.

Table 1

Education of Background of Group 1 (Percentage)

Grad degree in ed.	60
Undergrad degree in ed.	9
College degree in non ed. field	7
Jr. college degree	12
High school diploma	11
Other	1

Table 2

Characteristics of Respondents (N = 191)

	Group 1	2	3	4
% of respondents	31 (57)*	38 (70)	19 (35)	10 (19)
Mean yrs. ed. experience	16.6	21.7	8.8	23.6
Mean yrs. SSW experience	6.1	11.0	6.4	17.6
Sex				
% Male	46	56	33	61
% Female	54	44	67	39
Race				
Black	29	44	40	11
White	67	53	57	83
Other	4	3	3	6
Age				
% under 30	4	0	17	0
% 31-39	29	18	30	13
% 40-49	28	34	33	31
% 50 and over	39	48	20	56
Location				
Urban	20	29	43	5
Suburban	14	23	31	58
Rural	66	49	26	37
Mean Salary	16,500	19,500	19,350	20,400

* Data in parentheses is actual number of respondents for each group.

Table 3

Average Caseload Per Group

	Group 1	2	3	4
Elementary	20.8	25.9	33.0*	37.7*
Junior High	10.3	25.9*	23.3*	33.8*
High School	21.6	22.7	22.9	25.7
Total	52.7	74.5*	79.2*	97.2*

*Differences are significant between these groups and Group 1 at $p < .05$.

Notes and References

1 National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

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4 L. B. Costin, "An Analysis of the Tasks in School Social Work," Social Service Review, 43 (1969), pp. 273-285.

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6 National Center for Policy Analysis, The Failure of Our Public Schools: The Causes and a Solution (Dallas, TX: Public Affairs Department, 1983).